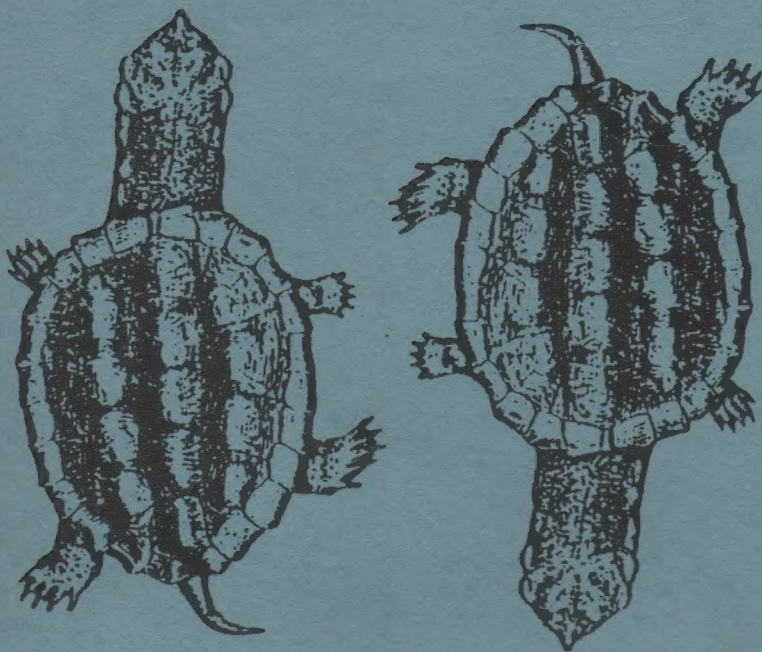


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**IF I WASN'T ALEXANDER
I WOULD LIKE TO BE DIOGENES**

by Roberto Ohrt



*Chance dictates that the
North latitudes headlines.*
-- Guy D. Debord

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How unknown can one be? Before becoming famous, after becoming famous, after one's death, during a fifteen minute television broadcast, among one's friends, among one's enemies, or even in a "War Game" in which one is faced with these questions & other possibly contiguous ones, let us remind ourselves of the events which are roughly the mid-point of the period which we shall be considering.

During the Winter semester of 1966 Strasbourg University became the scene of a scandal so successful that eye-witnesses recall, for instance, that "Sassitronen was a compulsory subject at the university then"....a nice description but a misapprehension all the same. But its success could also be measured by the distribution of the pamphlet at the heart of the scandal: *De la misère en milieu étudiant, considérée sous ses aspects économiques, politiques, psychologiques, sexuels et notamment intellectuels et de quelques moyens pour y remédier*. The academic-sounding title lent the pamphlet exactly the veneer of gravity which befitted the occasion of its first presentation and distribution: the ceremony marking the opening of the university year in the winter of 1966. During the ceremony student representatives, who had been elected in the normal way, distributed the pamphlet, which had been printed in a run of 10,000 using funds from the annual student budget and which was unavailable two months later, to the dignitaries and all the other people present, together with the

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North initiates hostilities.*

-- Guy E. Debord

How unknown can one be? Before becoming famous, after becoming famous, after one's death, during a fifteen minute television broadcast, among one's friends, among one's enemies, or on a Sunday afternoon, engrossed in a "War Game" in the shade? So as to familiarize ourselves with these questions & other possibly contiguous ones, let us remind ourselves of the events of the year which is roughly the middle point of the period which we shall be considering.

During the Winter semester of 1966 Strassburg University became the scene of a scandal so successful that eye-witnesses recall, for instance, that "Situationism was a compulsory subject at the university then"...a nice description but a misapprehension all the same. But its success could also be measured by the distribution of the pamphlet at the heart of the scandal: *De la misere en milieu etudiant, consideree sous ses aspects economiques, politiques, psychologiques, sexuels et notamment intellectuels et de quelques moyens pour y remedier*. The academic-sounding title lent the pamphlet exactly the veneer of gravity which befitted the occasion of its first presentation and distribution: the ceremony marking the opening of the university year in the winter of 1966. During the ceremony student representatives, who had been elected in the normal way, distributed the pamphlet, which had been printed in a run of 10,000 using funds from the annual student budget and which was unobtainable two months later, to the dignitaries and all the other people present, together with the

assurance that they would all immediately resign their positions in order thus to express the scorn they felt for the small role accorded them in the game of democracy.

The text of the pamphlet was as demanding as it was unambiguous. Its conclusions were patently obvious after the first two sentences: "To make shame more shameful by giving it publicity. We will not be far wrong if we say that, after the policeman and the priest, the student is the most despised creature in France..." (1)

The appearance of the pamphlet had been announced beforehand in a small leaflet which presented different situations in the form of a photo story. One of these showed two Western heroes in discussion on horseback: "What are you up to nowadays?" "I'm working on reification" "Oh yes, very serious business, lots of fat books and lots of paper on a big table!" "No, I go for a lot of walks, that's what I do most -- I go for a lot of walks."

So that the students might distribute the leaflet around the lecture hall effectively and without being stopped, the cybernetician, Abraham Moles, who was about to hold his debut lecture as a new professor, was driven from the lectern by some ripe tomatoes. The same thing happened in Paris when the text arrived there. The review *Internationale Situationiste* also appeared in Paris, and a full report of the events which took place in October, 1967 was printed in the eleventh issue. Before the end of the year translations of "On the Poverty of Student Life" had been published in full or in part in London, Barcelona, New York, Amsterdam, Berlin, Copenhagen and Stockholm.

The excessive interest of the press in the events in Strassburg played a calculated part in this chain reaction. The fears and suspicions which snowballed in the press became all the more wild when it became clear that it was difficult to understand the reports ostensibly recording the details of the affair.

According to these reports, there was an organization which went by the name of the "Internationale Situationiste" (from now on it will be referred to as I.S.) pulling the strings in the background. This international could control events without making any compromises or offering any explanatory word as to its incredible aims. This astounded even those who considered themselves affiliated. The influence and the style of the I.S. suggested a rigidly led cadre organization somewhere between the communists and the anarchists, yet nobody had heard of it before. And where exactly was one to look for it? What was one to make of the information that this organization had already existed for the past ten years; and how could one explain the fact that it had never consisted of more members than could be accommodated in a reasonably spacious apartment? The leader, so rumor had it, appeared to be a certain Guy Ernest Debord. The first chapter of his theoretical work *La Societe du Spectacle* (the Society of the Spectacle) was printed in the above mentioned issue 11 of the review and was then published in Paris in December 1967; by June 1968 it was already out of print again. According to the revolutionaries, the book had appeared precisely at that moment when the old world, which constantly challenged youth and happiness, was forced to confront the new generation on the streets.

It is characteristic of the possibilities, which exist in an epoch and the way its talents are distributed that the few situationists there were had not only instigated the Strassburg scandal but also constituted the working core of the movement which, between January and March 1968, fanned the flames of the riots in the Paris suburb of Nanterre, out of which the May revolt in Paris grew. After that everyone was looking for the situationists and by the end people thought they had actually seen them. So *The Society of the Spectacle* found a large

audience across the world -- even in Japan -- quite independently of the management of large publishing houses, and became, after the Strassburg brochure perhaps, one of the first bestsellers of the new international revolutionary movement.

Even today, Debord's influence makes itself apparent in the most disparate, unexpected and even frightening ways; whether, unacknowledged, in the work of the carefully cheerful, but basically fatalistic, Baudrillard, or in the short-lived punk movement, whose svengali, Malcolm McLaren, managed -- in true English style -- to turn some of the situationists' theses into money; or in the field of film. However, the only explicit vote of thanks to Debord to be found is in the credits for "Koyaanisqatsi".

Beyond this Debord was forgotten. Yet he remains our contemporary, uncompromisingly unattainable; and there is always someone somewhere rediscovering him, admiring him, seeking and never finding him. He is the stuff of which legends are made.

The French version of existentialism, lacking in any sense of excess, could not contain Debord. We, however, are the witnesses of an amusing, paradoxical spectacle. On the one hand, Sartre, whose first concern was to write for future generations, and who was propelled step by step into the arms of the contemporary, drowning in an ever widening sea of current affairs. On the other hand Debord, who was only interested in current affairs and who finds himself condemned to work towards a distant future where he faces a posthumous fame, which -- if I know him - - leaves him cold.... (2)

Asger Jorn, Debord's friend, made this rational and shrewd assessment in 1964, and, although the events of four years later may have suggested an alternative turn of events, today everything seems to point to such an outcome after all.

Guy Ernest Debord was only 20 when "in the middle of the century" he moved to Paris, the city which could still be a city after the Second World War. Perhaps he was supposed to study

there. He became aware of a group who called themselves "lettrists" after "*lettre*". A compelling revolutionary programme had produced a crucial step, which can be historically proven to have been overdue, first in the history of poetry and then in the history of culture as a whole: the dissolution of the word into its letters, of the expression into its components. The letters or elements, which could be used as one wished, were the raw material of a new creation. It was nothing less than zero hour for poetry. In 1946 the first book on lettrist technique appeared in Paris, and its founder, who called himself Isadore Isou, made much of the fact that the first lettrist poems had already been written during the war; he has also, right up to the present day, made every effort to apply his invention, under the motto "the only post-45 Avantgarde", to virtually anything one can think of. Whoever wants to discover the full breadth of his work must first buy himself a new bookcase.

The group which gathered around Isou between 1946 and 1952 did develop a poetic practice which was quite fascinating -- and quite independent of its doctrinaire and ridiculous theorizing. Young artists -- such as the 16 year old Francois Dufrenne, who was later to be numbered amongst the "nouveaux realistes" -- stood up on a stage during poetry readings, which were then still highly regarded, in front of audiences which might contain new and old surrealists, existentialists, communists or literary figures, and recited, with conscientious emphasis, "*crescendo juesqu'au hurlement*", poems like these:

iodn VEININ boudn KLEININ
shoudn gueinin FAIERE gysn REININ
taiere leinin schpien zoudn heinin
ludn loudn schnien mound meinin (3)

One of the richest sources of inspiration for this

escalation of verbal slips, is intoxication, and -- despite echoes of things heard in the '20s the effect must have been surprising and at least amusing and liberating. 'A young man stops a young lady in the street with the words "Madam would you permit me to accompan-*noy* you." (4)

It is in just this way that, in many of the case histories which Freud reports in his *Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, a verbal slip unexpectedly leads to what one would call a situation. In this light we can see the lettrist talks as a provocation of situations and -- still with Freud -- we can see the practice of Forgetting, which the radical lettrists wanted to practice in an equally systematic fashion, as a force of the same kind. We make this verbal slip, we forget the rules, we play the wrong game, we play something or other. However, it is impossible not to notice a forced element already present in the monotonous rhythmicization in the poem. The application of the lettrist technique to poetry was the first, presumably the simplest, and, as it turned out, not even an original step. But, the authors must have enjoyed the scandal they caused when they made their appearances. Not much later, a lettrist dressed as a priest stood up in the pulpit of Notre Dame and read an unambiguous message; he accused the church of lying and prophesied the truth, the death of God.

The first communal action, which Debord as a lettrist also participated in, was the application of lettrist technique to film. Several films were made between 1950 and 1952 in which the dissection of the language of film was intended to demonstrate lettrism's power of renewal. F. Dufrene's film *Tambours et jugement premier* was completely broken down into its component parts. There was no film reel. Dufrene positioned four people in the four corners of the dark cinema and had them speak a dialogue, the pictures, the music and the story. The film *L'Anticoncept* by the lettrist Gil Wolman was not projected onto a

screen but onto a white balloon. The film showed sequences of white circles on a black background or black circles on a white ground. The soundtrack consisted of several lettrist poems -- Wolman's specialty was sibilants, breath, initial sound, i.e. the audible pauses -- and a text which would perhaps have been comprehensible had it not been delivered in a manner which so utterly confounded all expectations of sense and speech that it made no sense at all to the listener.

Debord dedicated his film *Hurlements en faveur de Sade* to Gil Wolman and this probably explains why the first published version of the script still envisaged music and images, while the film in its final form consisted of nothing but sequences of black and white illuminated screens. As anticipated, the audience revolted when these films were shown -- and this happened again years later in England. The lettrist pamphlet *ION*, the first and only issue of which appeared in April 1952, published the first version of Debord's film in the form of a script two months before the film was completed, as well as the introductory text printed in the appendix to this article: "Prolegomena for every future cinema." (5)

This, Debord's first text, is still firmly in the lettrist tradition. Peppered with numerous lettrist specialist expressions which he likes to work in as soon -- or even before -- an opportunity is provided by the appearance of a new idea or practice, Debord presents himself as an impossible person whom one can believe capable of anything and who has already some radical renewals behind him without being overly impressed by this himself. It goes without saying that one is a genius. Of much more importance is that one should not care about it. One is not supposed to enjoy writing, although several works are in the offing, one is incomprehensible, "three dimensional psychology" is only to be found in the title, and "by the way" one is violent. As in the film, in this

"Prolegomena" we hear for the first time of the "situations" which are to be of extraordinary importance in the future and in the perspective of a revolution. It remains to be seen what will actually be realized.

Like every other lettrist Debord also sought to define a particular contribution to the communal project. His specialty consisted in driving the moments of sense within speech to their limits. The film script, which was a montage of found fragments - passages from the Code Civile, newspaper articles, intimate questions between lovers, theoretical theses -- reduces language to its austere fundamentals, bringing out an implacable force which is directed against normality. The image of this process of austerity is the white screen. There was no text and the screen remained dark for a total of 24 minutes. The film script of the final version exists in German translation, *Geheui fur de Sade*, and in French. It is an example of the quirks of history that the film, i.e. the black and white sequences, was stolen during a re-showing of the film in the 80s by some late disciples of situationist ideas because they considered that the rescreening betrayed the film's historical position...a battle of wits? The following explanation by the 21 year old Debord may illuminate the historical position of the film; how much of a sense of humor the participants had could perhaps be revealed by whoever stole the film.

Notice to the French Association of film clubs.

Explanation of the film *Lamentations for de Sade*.

The spectacle goes on. Even after drinking, the importance of aesthetics still provides an excellent object for jokes. We have left the cinema. The scandal is only too justified. I will never provide explanations. Now you are all alone with our secrets. At the SOURCE OF A NEW BEAUTY and later in the great desert, flowing and bordered by the allee des cygnes (all arts are mediocre games which change nothing) his face for the first time was free of that childhood which called itself his life. The

particular conditions of the cinema allowed the anecdote to be interrupted by long periods of empty silence. All the perfumes of Arabia. The urban morning. At the SOURCE OF A NEW BEAUTY. But that will no longer be what's at issue. All that was not really of interest. One has to lose oneself. (6)

During the summer of 1952 the "internationale lettriste" was formed; its members included all those who rejected the exhausting formalism of Isadore Isou and who were searching above all for an alternative revolutionary practice. They made their split known in a pamphlet, really nothing more than a leaflet, *Internationale Lettriste*, nr. 1-4. They then published *Potlatch* in a similar format, of which 29 issues appeared between 1954 and 1957. Nr. 30, which appeared in 1959, was already an internal circular for the situationists. It was during this period that the majority of the ideas were conceived which were later to become part of I.S. programme. *Potlatch* was sent to people who were interested, or to those considered worthy of it, and was distributed among the general public in specific areas of Paris, on the "Continent Contrescarpe" or in the nearby "St. Ghetto des Prets". Today it is quite a valuable collectors' item, not because it contained the advice: *Ne collectionnez pas Potlatch, les temps travaille contre vous*", but because it went unheeded as one, if not the most unassuming, among the many papers circulating in Paris at that time. The small scraps of paper which bore printed mottos by the lettrists: "If you think you are a genius, or if you think you are at least possessed of a brilliant intelligence, then come to the Internationale Lettriste" or: "Construct yourself a little situation without a future" would have had equally little resonance. On its home territory in Paris the "Internationale Lettriste", like the I.S. after it, cultivated an exclusive and wild style. They behaved like a combat unit from a forgotten war, whose bases had to be in disreputable areas and who

approached the city and the cityscape as if it were a field of military operation. They played with pseudonyms and secret messages. By declaring a boycott on particular bars or conducting noisy withdrawal maneuvers they tried to freeze out scenes they despised. There were sometimes reports of dangerous situations or clashes with the enemy. They spread a reputation for impatience and enjoyed firing on accessible idols, imparting artistic insults, and generally conducting the war using every class of weaponry the written word provided.

On one occasion they cooperated with the surrealists. An homage to Rimbaud was intended to provide the opportunity for a peace treaty. The leaflet which was jointly signed bore the title: "Ca commence bien". Without prior consultation the lettrists printed a text on the back page below the words, *et ca finit mal*. In it they told the surrealists what they had said often enough on other occasions. The witty critique of Breton's circle of friends ended unambiguously: "The surrealist movement consists of fools and frauds."

The Anti-Copyright which was later to be taken over by the situationist review made its first appearance in *Potlatch*: "All texts published in *Potlatch* can be reproduced, adapted or quoted from without any mention of the source." The articles which are printed here communicate a certain impression of the elegant discussions conducted by Debord. (7) Why lettrism, in particular, makes clear the extent to which the "internationale lettriste" had moved away from its origins in lettrism.

In June 1954 the lettrists organized an exhibition in the Galerie du passage, passage Moliere, which was entitled *66 metagraphies influentielles*, and which was shown in Lieges in Belgium under the title *Propaganda Metagraphique*. One of the several works by Debord was the collage: *le temps passe, en effet, nous passons avec lui*, (8) which recalled the Spanish Civil War against a background of contemporary events. A glance at French

post-war history brings us quickly to the most important facts. The French army suffered a decisive defeat in 1954 at Dien Bien Phu in the colonial war they had instigated in Vietnam. This experience did not hinder the military subjection of the Algerian independence movement which started that year and continued until 1962. Immediately after the end of this war the French state demonstrated how its historical consciousness had been sharpened in Nuremberg. A general amnesty was declared for all crimes committed during the Algerian war.

We know that Debord did not make his last film in 1952, and his interest in movement in pictures and the use of editing and zoom techniques to emphasize this movement can clearly be seen in this collage where texts are posted like commentary in a film. In considering the aesthetic aspect -- and this is true for his later films -- it is useful to look at similar products by Andy Warhol, for instance his *Red Race Riot* of 1963. Both are concerned with the denunciation and identification of violence, with unsentimentally taking stock of events. Newspaper photographs or newsreels, which present explosive but badly made material -- anything else was not possible in the situation -- have, in their strange crudity and accidental imprecision, something which treats the invisibility of a fatal event or a war situation as a socially organized invisibility, and suggests that an alternative perception has been suppressed. The forces of law and order move in, the police block the view; somewhere a spot, a body, the breadth of events in which power is produced. And we can see its face now, as we see it at other times, when it shows us its pale, advertisement smile?

In his art products Andy Warhol, by developing a bad style, tries to present the cynicism of society in order to finally outbid it with his own private cynicism...in the hope that he can thereby annul it. Debord's work, while explicitly sharing

this hope, places less faith in the power of the aesthetic than in the power of the word and, via uncontrollable negation, arrives at a position which refuses to recognize any realization other than revolution. This position lives in silent dependency on the bad developments of the time, the totality of the ruling order, the existence of which it is constantly obliged to prove -- even, when necessary, in the places apparently still beyond this order's reach.

Then the question as to whom can one associate with, and what such an alliance can yield, becomes of paramount importance; it governs the negotiations by which groupings are formed. Of the lettrist friends who set up the "Internationale Lettriste" with Debord in 1952, only Debord and his girlfriend Michele Bernstein join the I.S. M. Dahou's name appears only twice on the list of the editorial collective. All others were expelled, the last in 1957. The report of the break with Gil Wolman reads like an obituary:

Wolman played an important part in 1952 in the organization of the lettrist left and in the founding of the I.L. He was the author of 'megapneumatique' poems, a theory of 'cinematochrone' and a film; he was the lettrist delegate to the congress in Alba, September 1956. He was 27 years old.

Debord first met Asger Jorn in 1955. Jorn had experience of collective work going back to before the Second World War; he had a great talent for the art of creating groups, forcing movements and producing new realities by means of small interventions in what already existed. At the congress in Alba, the results of his initiatives in Italy and during his COBRA period were linked with Debord's work. One year later the "Internationale Situationniste" was formed. The minutes record 5 votes in favor, one abstention and two votes against.

This occasioned the publication of Debord's *Rapport sur la construction des situations et sur les conditions de l'organisation et de l'action de la tendance situationniste internationale* which,

it may be hoped, may throw more light onto situationist practice. Debord assumes that the fundamental essence of situationist research is involved in the construction of situations. He does offer some concrete details of how ideas can be practically realized, and information about the conscious design of an encounter, the integration of the city into work and the inspiration it provides, the necessity for situationist screenplays, the use of the media; there is also some discussion of financial strategies. But all this occupies only the smaller part of the work. Debord spends more time explaining in detail various situationist terms: game, psychogeography, *derive* or drifting, *detournement* or integration into or alienation from, unitary urbanism and the aim of praxis. It ranges from research in the conditions for the transformation of human behavior and attitudes (in order, through the example of new behavior, to teach people living the backward life of the '50s about a better life), to the design of a utopia, e.g. a situationist city, to be built only on the principle that the relationship between behavior and environment must be a mutually enriching one. There were serious discussions at a later stage with an Italian millionaire about such a plan. At today's values the investment being considered would have run into billions.

If the style of the analysis does not make it too obvious, behind the perspective presented in such an organized fashion, there lurked the lettrist strategy of *dereglement*, and if one did not naturally understand what the situationists meant by "game", "*derive*" and "celebration" then a few glasses of mescal or a bottle of white rum might help one to get the point. Nobody had anything against this method -- on the contrary. Debord ran a bar for a short while in the Rue Descartes, called "la Methode", and Malcolm Lowry was one of his favorite authors.

Most of the "Report on the construction of situations" is taken up with an analysis of the class struggles and cultural history of the 20th century, a history of failures from dadaism to COBRA. This analysis is conducted in the language of Marxist treaties and reveals, particularly when it comes to artistic questions, a misunderstanding of art, which despite being very alive to innovation, retains much which is traditional and bad: "The situationist position consists in relying on transience, in contrast to the aesthetic processes which strive to fix emotion." (10) With this assessment Debord sinks to the level of a widely held and glib judgement of art, based not on any knowledge of its history or its most contemporary innovations, but on the object, the commodity, on spectacular market reports, and ultimately on bourgeois suspicions as to the uses and merits of the artist. In the brochure *Critique de la politique economique*, a situationist publication of 1960, Asger Jorn formulated some arguments for a counter position:

After all, there is a form which gives up its content without ever becoming empty (because it always refills itself): art, spiritual creation, which retains its qualities at the very moment in which it displays its wares. The secret of this property, which some people call supernatural and metaphysical, and which others deny exists, consists in the fact that the force which is released is not to be found in the work of art: it exists in him who perceives it, if he is capable of perceiving it. The value does not proceed from the work itself, but is rather released in the spectator himself. That is the simple and natural explanation of the value of a work of art and of all other values which are considered spiritual.... Art is the invitation to an expenditure of energy, without any specific aim other than that which the spectator himself can contribute. That is the expenditure. All who are too mean to make such an effort, or completely incapable of it, despise art. (p. 21)

It would of course be simple, and the more we consider the

immense artistic production of the present the more unavoidable it seems, to name examples of art and artists who paradoxically prove Debord right and only take Jorn seriously as long as he is not too demanding. But we want to conduct a more simple counter move: between 1952 and 1962 the situationist international consisted almost exclusively of artists, primarily painters in the painterly tradition, at it was really only in this sphere that it was able to prove itself an "international". Even in Paris, where Debord knew his way around extremely well, no other sphere could be found where behavior was open to adventure and experiment. For a long time Debord sought contact with the Marxist discussion group based around the magazine *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, which had been working towards a renewal of Marxism since 1950; he was also to be found in the audience at lectures by Henri Lefebvre, whose *Critique of Everyday Life* (1947) had exercised a marked influence on Debord's cultural and class analyses. Together with Pierre Cajurs, from *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, a joint text was produced in 1960 as a platform for discussion; it was entitled *Preliminaires pour une definition de l'unite du programme revolutionnaire*. But neither the contact with *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, nor the often close relationship with Henri Lefebvre, ever led to a common praxis, nor the opening of a discussion group in an experimental context.

In his "Report of the construction of situations" Debord sums up:

From 1952 to 1955 the Lettrist International, after some necessary purges, continually moved towards a sort of absolutist rigor leading to an equally absolute isolation and ineffectuality, and ultimately to a certain immobility, a degeneration of the spirit of critique and discovery.

So the relationship between radicality at any cost and the loss of individuality, as well as the fatal distance from that

which allows the generation of conflicts and wealth, had also occurred to Debord. He continues:

We must definitely supersede this sectarian conduct in favor of real actions. This should be the sole criterion on which we join with or break from comrades.

So the founding of the I.S. was presumably motivated less by the intoxication of bidding farewell, which fades sadly away after a few hours of solitary wandering, and more by a greater confidence and a wider circle of acquaintance. However,

Naturally this does not mean that we should renounce breaks, as everyone urges us to do. We think, on the contrary, that it is necessary to go still further in breaking with habits and persons.

And he draws himself up immediately for an appeal which shows once again that Debord cannot acknowledge the claims of art, which he quite naturally calls upon for his practice:

We must collectively define our programme and realize it in a disciplined manner, by all means -- even artistic ones.

Asger Jorn will later point out to him that art has constantly had to resist attempts to use it in such a way, from every side.

The I.S. gains members across Europe almost exclusively within the far flung net of Jorn's contacts. Together with Jorn, Debord publishes two books: *Fin de Copenhague* (around 1957) and *Memoires* (1959). They are the result of days spent together at the printer's: Jorn's drawing -- the wandering lines provide the unpredictable and serene structure of the work -- are integrated into Debord's found pieces, sentences from newspapers, advertising, comics, photos of the nightlife of Paris situationists, paper soldiers from old war games, etc. *Fin de Copenhague* -- in the meantime "*ein wertvolles Buch*" (a valuable book), it contains these German words amongst others -- is the record of a week long drinking bout. *Memoires* -- bound in sandpaper and equally sought after today -- is a clever, cryptic and often baffling literal

account of Debord's experiences in Paris in 1953. This is an example of one of the "*elements prefabriques*":

Je n'etais rien, au depart. A mes cotes, pas l'ombre d'une force, ni d'une organisation. En France, aucun repondant et aucune notoriete. A l'etranger, ni credit, ni justification.

That is Debord's poetry. A borrowed sentence, isolated, its source unrecognizable. With it a gesture, a proud tone, borrowed romanticism, imperceptibly broken.

Although the end of the line had logically been arrived at in the "explanation" of the *Lamentations for de Sade*, Debord made two films in 1959 and 1960 taking up a series of ideas which had had to be sacrificed to the radical black/white concept in 1952; sequences like that were now only included as a memento. And to emphasize that he has now adopted the style of an unshakable and firm observer of his time -- "the camera never concentrated on a monument because we were filming the other way around, from the perspective of the monument" (12) -- a melancholy vibration tinges the clipped, indifferent soundtrack.

Debord constructed the film using ready made sequences, found objects, e.g. newsreel sequences from the Algerian War, advertisements for detergents, stills from famous films -- the rights for the original sequences he wanted were not released -- some wanderings through Paris, some bars, pictures of situationists who thus place themselves in the historical moment. There are moments when the spoken texts, the filmed slogans and the texts in the subtitles, which are different again, become so tangled up that no spectator can follow the film. The language of impatience, theory, terrorizes the senses. The film slips away, heeds no call. With a little humor one can imagine oneself a drunk who falls to the ground

because he is given too many explanations and too many directions. The spectator sees his own experience continually penetrated. Unexpectedly the film returns, it speaks clearly, intelligibly and then our overeager understanding is once again interrupted by a cut. A theoretical film style, a harsh light of reflection is superimposed over what is straightforward, over the pauses and over the careless appearance.

Finally: "The film too must be destroyed." At the conclusion of the panorama of a situationist's life in Paris -- for the time being in a found world -- which all seems to the cinemagoer like a story which happened long ago -- Debord draws together all his thoughts about art in this one sentence. Then his filmic art dissolves in sudden seriousness -- which could really happen at any time. Insight returns, everything is as it was; what is the point of describing the epoch effectively in order to "add yet more ruins to the old world of spectacle and remembrances". And so the film ends like in a gangster film, with the tape with the secret instructions which, once heard, self-destructs.

Was it only a question of time before the I.S. of artists disbanded? With hindsight this may appear a simple diagnosis. Between 1957 and 1962 Debord tried to come to an agreement over a joint programme with around thirty artists -- Constant, Pinot Gallizio, the artists from the Munich group SPUR, Maurice Wyckaert and others, as well as Jorn. In 1962 they were all either expelled from the I.S. or left of their own accord, and by 1967 Debord was the only remaining member to have taken part in those early discussion about the possibilities of art.

Of course art was at the center of the questions about practice. But it must be said that no answers in practice were forthcoming. Debord, who had little sympathy for painting beyond his not exactly original formulation that there would be situationists after the revolution who would paint among other things, sat opposite painters, the majority of whom had equally

little sympathy for his position. Apart from Jorn, who not only guaranteed the mobility of the organization, and Debord, there was nobody who was in the position to lead the I.S. -- which was at least theoretically what the anti-hierarchical I.S. demanded of everyone...

Constant's attempt to develop the New Babylon Project within the I.S. led to a swift breaking off of dialogue; and Pinot Gallizio's flourishing project of industrial painting, which was declared bankrupt, and the activities of the SPUR group, were all swiftly tried and judged. They all still had their independent positions outside of the I.S.; but they could neither hold with, nor finally hold out against, Debord inside the I.S. The most remarkable encounter in the I.S. must have been that between the irredeemable anti-artist Debord and that irredeemable artist, Jorn. Remarkable above all in that two such different people with such widely differing interests, so talented in their own areas and with such established opposing positions, should be able to agree with each other, mutually widening the sphere within which the play of their faculties had an effect, challenging one another. The answer which their meeting demanded corresponded to no pre-existing formula -- that too was in keeping with the rules of the game.

A quick answer provides, at the very best, a pointer, an entry, but never, as actionism would have it or spontaneism would like it, the arrival of a genuine truth. Art counsels avoiding this, taking time to talk, making the material speak through our handling. The canvas is the simplest image of this strategy. In 1960 Jorn wanted to give a collage with a mood of melancholy resignation the title *discussion des methodes*; "if everybody were to act in his own way, and we no longer tread a shared path." (13) This is possibly a reflection of his experience with Debord, for that year he had tried unsuccessfully and for the last time to make contact with the

I.S. Despite their different paths he always remained good friends with Debord.

So their game was not successful and they could not prevent what happened after 1962 on a much larger scale and with devastating consequences. The division within the I.S. between the competing tendencies turned the revolutionary environment into a split between revolutionaries without painting and even art without thought; painterly art was equally far removed from both and had in its turn been squeezed to the edge of events by artistic fashions which had gone flat.

What appears in Debord's films in the melancholy past is expressed in his theoretical works by a distancing historical narrative which all too often counts up bygone epochs. Between 1957 and 1962 we had the "overcoming of art", which everyone had now put behind them. The 8th issue of the I.S., in January 1963, closed this epoch. The exhibition in Odense showed some illustrations of this dividing line. (14)

Until 1966 things were very quiet with the situationists; Nr 9 of the Review appeared in August 1964, primarily taking stock of the world of the spectacle, demanding that it make some statements in its own language. A speech which Debord made at an I.S. conference in 1966 is once again concerned with practice, and on closer observation is very illuminating for several reasons:

We are concerned above all with the constitution of a global critical theory and (this follows automatically) its communication to all sectors which objectively have already started with negation, which remains subjectively fragmentary. (15)

The difference between this and the early I.S. can be seen if we look at a later argument which makes a moment of new orientation appear to stand out all the more visibly. For the situationists it goes without saying "that, if we exclude the bed, probably the most important part of human activity has always taken place at the table, ever since the table was invented." (16)

Let us for a moment place a canvas between the bed and table; we not only see a swiftly assembled partition between the two areas, we also see an instrument which -- since its invention -- has suggested a way of communicating the issues which have been won or lost in bed as well as the discussions conducted at the table until midnight. The situationists wanted more: a clear language, they wanted people to be able to construct their lives in situations, to construct their own stories themselves instead of only re-presenting them, "fixing" them. Let us assume that even the situations have got lost with this solution. What in the earlier discussions had been suggested as guidelines for a higher game, and which were to that extent meant to be concretely used in the construction of situations, have become lost in a theory which will only be able to recall that it has been realized after the great event. Enough experiences have obviously been gathered. "Game", "*derive*", or "celebration" no longer appear in different situations; they are the fixed points of a programme of one situation, revolution, which wants to be modern but which can no longer be contemporary in anything but style. Seen from the outside, their charming and quick-witted impudence, their immodesty, had since 1966 provoked ever greater fantasies and expectations. People who did not know the situationists personally respected them all the more. But the dynamic of this imaginative force, with exactly the same exaggeration, saw life outside the I.S. -- i.e. itself -- suffer decline into a lifeless, oppressive monotony, which mercilessly compromises all of its inhabitants. The strange end of the story draws near: the I.S. was to become the canvas for illusions, without there being a situationist in sight capable of painting, amongst other things.

Debord recognized the danger and the error which desires a world without free space while transfiguring the pen-pushing situationists into satanic angels:

Quite the contrary: this free space seems to me to lie normally outside the sphere of our communal activity, which entails a certain exhaustion. That appears particularly obvious to me when I consider the personal theoretical work which can be achieved by participating in situationist projects. (17)

And he warns the situationists not to be content with the role that has been accorded them. But Debord could do nothing against the force of this dynamic; he only speeded the activities on their way. This was the tendency which met events between 1964 and 1968 more than half way. Debord had seen some instances of a similar development during the period of the "internationale lettriste" when a narrow-minded rigour had turned against the creative force of the movement itself. The danger was concealed in May 1966 by the growing fame of the I.S. and the decision to allow new members to join the organization in view of the new situation. At the last congress in Venice in 1969, 18 situationists met together, several times the normal number.

Until then the I.S. had produced the clearest and most relevant analyses of the Paris risings and had made the most thorough efforts to prevent the imperative theoretical renewal (from the recollection and critique of Marxism to psychology and cultural criticism) from ending in an endeavor without interest, unaffected by the possibilities and forms of expression of the present. Far removed from the "incredible instructions" which its couriers had once delivered to each other, the I.S., in contrast to most marxist groupings and despite its distance and criticism, had still managed to retain something of the artistic revolutionary movement. In its existence it pushed forward to experiences and knowledge which cannot be viewed with indifference by anyone with a historical consciousness in the 20th century. But it was clearly not down to earth enough to resist admiration and, particularly in the last years, not adventurous enough to lend itself to situations and experiments which would surely not have harmed

the awareness of illusions.

In 1972 only 3 of 18 were left. Since 1957, 72 had taken part in the experiment. Debord outlined the cost: in imitation of the internal circular which Marx and Engels had distributed over 100 years previously on the split in the International Workers' Association, he published, together with Eduardo Sanguinette *The Veritable Split in the International*. After a resonant drum roll from the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, the critique begins and, in 61 theses, presents the new strategy in light of the fact that the I.S. has decayed into an image only looked at by its admirers within and without:

Unlike previous purges which, under less favourable historical conditions, were intended to strengthen the I.S. and which made it stronger every time, the intention this time was to make it weaker. There is no saviour: it was up to us once again to prove this (...) We had never been seen to be involved in the affairs, quibbles and business of the radical left politicians and the progressive intelligentsia. And now when we can flatter ourselves that we have achieved the most shocking notoriety amongst this riff-raff, we will become even less accessible, we will go even further underground. The more famous our theses become, the more obscure we ourselves will be. (Thesis 57) (18)

Protection for the merciless criticism of the immediate environment was provided by an imaginary revolutionary party, a theory that demanded no miracles from the working class and could also never be suspected of desiring to make such a demand (for it was not a real machine) but which proved that a class is about to re-surface everywhere -- except amongst the followers of the I.S. itself.

If the diffuse influence of the I.S. can be seen to be everywhere, then this is because the I.S. is itself nothing other than the concentrated expression of a historical subversion,

which is present everywhere (...) And so in the end it is not a question of a theory of the I.S., but of a theory of the proletariat. (Theses 2-3) (19)

So the soluble fish lies better on the beach.

Debord's theory was for the main part, excluding the claims made in the economic passages, a sharply observed psychology of public life, whose poetry could give anonymous processes which lacked subjects, a human and personal existence. He observed how a social event gets ready, how public transport suffers, a ceremony loses its way, an institution begins to dream. He had a feeling for modern confusions, for the question which always provokes a feeling of helplessness: "Who is the master of the house?" But Debord was a psychologist who saw his patients entangled in hopeless affairs. The multitude of symptoms is a reflection of incompetent and insatiable vanity, and there was never any material, in his view, which could have turned out better than it did. In this striking world even the lie itself was a moment of falsehood.

Criticism runs the risk of lapsing into simple hostility, when its object offers such overwhelming disappointments. With his theses on the split in the I.S., Debord loses his way and finds himself back at the origin of his imagination. Applied to the character analysis of the failing situationists, the "pro-situationists", this poetry can no longer maintain the irritating tension created by alternating between distance and proximity. A rediscovered proletariat as a distant signal, on the one hand, and simultaneously, on the other, a few individuals, embarrassingly close, whom one doesn't want anything to do with. Debord cannot manage without Leninist affectations, or without an opening into a real project.

His unquestionable position of leadership was often criticized for standing in the way of the supposed collectivity. The

sequence of events puts this objection in perspective. There was an attempt to combine all the opposing forces together in a coherent opposition group every time Debord made an important decision in 1952. The opposition was led by Isou. In 1952 there was the "2eme Internationale lettriste", there was another attempt in Scandinavia with the "2eme Internationale Situationniste" and a further attempt at the end of 60s. None got very far. So Debord won the gamble he took with his decisions and one cannot blame him for the failings of his colleagues. And they had many failings. But the question remains: would Debord's concerns -- which, in 1972, he still identified with those of the world -- have been lost if he had been less rigorous and more able to form alliances? It is also possible to point to some individual members whose contributions Debord was incapable of taking up -- Asger Jorn, for instance, or Attila Kotanyi, who wanted to establish the dialectic within the I.S. on a stronger footing, or Anton Hartstein who had immediately publicized the inadequacy of the theses about the split.

Was there, hidden behind the merely melancholy view of his life which Debord presented in 1978 in the film *In girum nocte et consumimur igni*, a life which could have never been led any other way and which was now advancing a justification of its existence, bearing its losses like trophies? Debord rightly claims that everyone can take something from his project, in order to better it. Fortunately he avoids the normal attitudes of the academic competition system which, because it treasures the possession of ideas, stylize the individual creator into an independent creator, who may well talk about communication while concealing its collective productivity in his work. Nor did he work with the artificial negative suggested by Andy Warhol for instance, who wanted simultaneously to be the focus of publicity and an

incommunicable blindspot, allowing every reflection to be dished up, only to consume it between a cynical yes and an indifferent no. Debord chose the old image of a secret society, and if certain individuals or he himself came too dangerously close to embodying the consequences of their propaganda, exile.

In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni is a latin palindrome, i.e. it reads exactly the same from back to front as it does from front to back: "We wander around in a circle in the night and are consumed by fire." With the magic incantation Debord tries to close the circle of his life in order to form the body of resonance of his consistency in abstaining from every role on the platform of spectacle, and communicating to it similes of happiness. He worked at the beauty of this film like a slave. He filmed an almost legendary series of images of the negative, the story of a revolutionary who managed skillfully and without being noticed to disturb elements which were revolving within each other, thus bringing them out of their orbit, and then in the shock of awareness told them more than they were allowed to know -- a fatal dose of knowledge -- before restoring them once more to their rightful place, where, disturbed, they then introduced an incurable disease into the world. The film is a memory, in which the lost age of the lost Paris of the 50s is invoked. One belonged to the "happy few", one was not squeamish. Then, it is said, the negative held court in Paris.

If Debord is telling us a fairy tale here, then we are allowed to qualify our admiration. Youth has the right to try everything and to be moody. The -- of course scarcely existent -- lettrist works could only make their presumptuousness appear all the more grandiose. No-one seemed young enough or cheeky enough then to be able to stop the lettrists from kidnapping beauty. They instructed their victim in violence, they took some of its dreams and gave it illegality and forbade it to speak of its sadness.

We pause in our admiration not only because we perceive

a late correction in the melancholy of this work, which attempts to conserve what was never really experienced in quite that way and so shows us the exact counter image of the picture of youth. What is retained -- and this explains the necessary distance of all memory -- is that the negative is never made to confront the fascination which ties it to the object of criticism. Instead of facing the dangers of this path, Debord creates the dangerousness of his person and his taste, which is so demanding that it no longer tries anything at all. It suits him that he "never achieved anything" and that he never wanted to "better" himself. "Here extremism freed itself of every particular goal and proudly dropped every aim." (21)

Beauty in its flight went unnoticed by its suitors. For a while it seemed to have found a safe hiding place in the idea of the situations to be constructed. Who wanted to be so persistent as to ask after situations in the past? They were not predestined, as the happenings were, to be carefully documented and to make their ephemerality obvious through a few dusty relics. So did these situations really ever exist?

One can search in vain in publications for reports that are more than mere announcements, and the situationists who are ready to speak about it can not tell much more. History finally revealed that the object of the search had rotated away long ago. The bulky fragments of Debord -- the proletarian world spirit or the damned situationist -- could at least be pieced together into a puzzle which asks why until now it has only ever been solved too late.

At this time -- 1972 -- Debord got to know Gerard Lebovici, the Director of the Editions Champs Libre, which has since then reprinted situationist texts, and one of the most influential men in the French film world. Lebovici gave Debord his little cinema "Studio Cujas" in the rue Cujas and thus gave him the opportunity to play his films at any time,

whether there was an audience for them or not.

In 1984 Lebovici was murdered in an underground car park in Paris; shot five times at point-blank range. The murder has remained unsolved. In their reports the ever well-informed press makes much of Lebovici's relations with radical left circles and especially his close friendship with Debord, and one could go on about terrorism and much more. They were clearly less interested in helping the overstretched police force with this clumsy hint than in doing their bit to destroy Lebovici, who in their opinion had asked for it. Debord read the newspapers and knew his rights. Some of the journalists had to cool their rash enthusiasm in court. Yet Debord's book on the murder of his friend remains a strange affair all the same. After his film *The society of the spectacle* (1973) he made another one two years later, a *Refutation of all judgements, laudatory and critical, which have been made until now about my film, 'The society of the spectacle'*; and he published the reviews of his last film, without commentary, in 1982, in a booklet. *Ordures et décombres* -- refuse and rubbish. In the same way, "Thoughts on the murder of Gerard Lebovici" consists mainly of press reports in which speculation about Debord reached fantastic proportions -- as might be expected given the theme "revolutionary and millionaire". Debord pedantically rejects all the false assumptions, puts some unwillingly discovered truths in the right light and gives the journalists, who are not accustomed to simple ideas, a little instruction in the simplicity of a carefree life. But he had performed this exercise with less vanity in his theoretical writings. This mirroring of himself in the press reports about the death of his friend suggests a dubious desire to feel that everywhere, and now here too, whenever he is the subject of discussion, he has been personally addressed. This keen hearing is in marked contrast to what other people call ignorance, Debord's exhibition of the fact that he feels all criticism is beneath him.

There have been the most varied forms of avant-garde, whose main motive has circled around the denunciation of the spectator. This protest has led to the creation of a whole mass of objects and painted canvasses which excused their ugliness with an international affront; their meaning is meant to come to the spectator via a series of suggestions and assaults, for which no sensual tracks have been laid. According to this logic, the incomprehensibility of a work is the index of its quality, its rejection by the public a sign of its success, and the unproductive overcoming of difficulties it demands is its particular contribution to the involvement of the spectator. If one dares to ask where the beauty of the work is, one has to endure the pedagogically delivered reproach that one is clinging onto old kitsch, or the impudent suggestion that one is bourgeois. This experience with the avantgarde has brought art into disrepute with the young, especially as the suggestion of protection has not been repudiated. This avantgarde is spreading among artists thanks to a decline in capabilities which reveals the decline in sociality and its communication. We have seen that there is no point in consciously furthering this decline.

From the lettrist games with ready made components to the rejection of pro-situationist refusal, Debord criticized the backwardness of the age compared with its technical possibilities, using an idea of Marx's. Art, as one of the elements of the superstructure, lost its interest for him. It appeared too obviously to be an expression of the denial of the possibilities which had been recognized with some optimism in the period of reconstruction in Europe. An oil painting it appeared somewhat old-fashioned; otherwise it illustrated the decline.

Debord was not alone in this rejection; besieged a few years later by the radical left, though he let no opportunity slip

for attacking his new surroundings from any angle, in order to keep it at a distance from himself, he was careful not to use as a reproach the shared contempt for art.

Many more general weaknesses of observation had now become apparent within the radical left, which caused that particular form of protest, artistic denial, to be forgotten. Perhaps soon no-one will be able to appreciate that, not far away, the social impact of revolutionary tendencies was being frittered away. That was, and would be, far from generous.

Meanwhile Debord claimed a new position: that of having provided the epoch with its best expression. Now, his linguistic skill cannot be denied; his indulgence of his artistic moods sets him apart from many other revolutionaries. But was it a question of expression? And if so, can there be a single expression of an epoch? This gentle distancing from subjectively held experiences and from the mixed, varied situations of life lead us to the expectation that we shall see the last things emerge from the good and the bad long announced on the horizon. A philosophical tradition demands that one confronts them alone.

We were concerned with presenting an unknown figure of our time. He is not quite as one might expect. He must even assure certain contemporaries that he is not the -- in original German -- "*Weltgeist*" (world spirit) behind a few noble drops. Debord has retired. But the wide-spread and ambitious ban on communication, the everyday concealment of even the most simple experiences, goes on as before.

In the street, alone, one thinks one has scattered enough formulae for immunization against the false world of commodities. And yet one's consciousness watches intently for the meaningful movement of its words or the answer it sends. A fixation which Debord expresses in the following way: "We wanted to build everything new, the same, but in the diametrically opposed direction. What they did, shows our plans clearly enough -- in

negative." (22) Not a discussion but an echo; the great ideas are no longer presented by a dialectician; instead they serve as logistical stylistic exercises.

We can argue about taste; in fact we have to. There is a lack of argument, not of fuel, when the fire magic of catastrophe shines reassuringly on the sense. To introduce argument here requires a taste for argument. Art cannot survive without this taste and it finds it difficult without this living environment. It is always its sign and wants also to be its signal. "You don't make a revolution in order to be poor." (Asger Jorn).

About ten years ago Debord hinted at some strategic experiments: "And -- this is really the only good news which I can offer here -- I will not deliver the results of this research in the form of a film." (23) There was often discussion of his fascination for war, which stayed with him all his life -- we will have more to say on this on another occasion. A couple of months ago the latest of Debord's publications appeared: the book, *Le 'Jeu de la Guerre'*. Debord presents a "*Kriegsspiel*" (War Game -- another useful German word) of his own devising.

We find a detailed account of a game he played with Alice Becker-Ho. The game is not marked by aggression. Ponderously and slowly the armies move their explosive mixture over the glass floor, allowing the geometric lightning of their now abstract threats of destruction to flash for only a few seconds.

The tableau shows the ground plan of a modern court; as introduction a cavalry bound for adventure gallops spiritedly over the flagstones into the enemy corridor. Steep walls at right angles -- "*la montagne*" -- constitute the constructive elements of the situation in the terrain; decoratively spread around the room, some seats, flower pots or cupboards. To

Debord's irritation the game cannot be subject to external accident. Neither wind nor weather, night nor day, reach into this garden, and the morale of the troops is always perfect; no cunning manoeuvre can be concealed from the enemy command. Let us add that nature in general can do little to please or annoy. No hill, no bog, no unknown valley, no wood edge, no wild stream, no beautifully situated town. As a reminder: the word "situation" was for along time only used in German as a specialist military term to describe all the moods of a found terrain, e.g. for a difficult operation against a secret base behind the lines.

Only a pass of f/10, the wallpaper door in the steep wall, remains for the comedy of errors. The home army cannot withstand this temptation. It leads all the units through it and the luck of war presents it with victory. What escapes Debord here could have been thought up by Diogenes. For all the great and powerful desires of this man who would so much have liked to have taken his place in the barrel, it would have slipped out of his hand and become a mouse parade for his objection.

Hamburg, May/June 1987

translated from the German by Ian Brunskill.

NOTES:

1. *Dag. Blend im Studenten Milieu*, Hamburg, Edition Nautilus, 1977.
English: *On the Poverty of Student Life*, London, Dark Star/Rebel Press, 1985.
2. Asger Jorn, *Signes graves sur les eglises de l'eure et du calvados*, Copenhagen, 1964, p. 291.
3. Isidore Isou, *Introduction a une nouvelle poesie et une nouvelle musique*, Paris, 1947.
4. London edition, Vol. 4, p. 77.
5. see p. 69
6. In *Internationale lettriste*, No. 2.
7. see p. 71
8. see p. 37.
9. *Potlach*, no 26, May 22nd 1957.
10. *Rapport zur Konstruktion von Situationen*, Hamburg, 1980, p. 53.
English: extracts in *Situationist International Anthology*, Berkeley, CA, Bureau of Public Secrets, 1981, pp. 17-27.
11. *ibid.* (= Hamburg), p. 40ff.
12. *Gegen den Film*, Hamburg, 1978, p. 20.
13. Asger Jorn, *Au pied dun mun*, exhibition catalogue, Jeanne Bucher, Paris, 1969.
14. Exi gallery, Odense, 1963.
15. *Die Wirkliche Spaltung in der Internationale*, Dusseldorf, 1973, p. 137.
16. *ibid.*, p. 121.
17. *ibid.*, p. 141.
18. *ibid.*, p. 98.
19. *ibid.*, p. 13.
20. *Errata*, 1-3, Dusseldorf, 1976.
21. *In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni*, Berlin, 1985, p. 48.
22. *ibid.*, p. 99.
23. *ibid.*, p. 92.

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